

Inside Philanthropy



The State of
American Philanthropy

Giving for
Climate Change
& Clean Energy

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ABOUT INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

Inside Philanthropy is a digital media site that covers the world of charitable giving. We report daily on foundations, major donors, and trends in philanthropy. Through our GrantFinder resource, we also profile and track thousands of funders working across key issue areas and geographic regions. Inside Philanthropy is supported by reader subscriptions and advertising. We do not receive funding from any other source. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com

ABOUT THE STATE OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

The State of American Philanthropy is a series of background papers on important topics and trends in U.S. philanthropy. The papers draw on past research and reporting by IP writers, as well as new interviews, grantmaking data, and other sources. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From floods and fires to hurricanes and heat waves, catastrophes across the United States and beyond over the last decade-plus have brought new attention to climate change. A new U.S. presidential administration focused on climate change and the loudly ticking clock—the world must roughly halve emissions from their current levels by 2030 to avoid catastrophe—are bringing new U.S. focus to humanity’s emergency.

Philanthropy related to climate change and clean energy has seen a steady increase over the past decade, and recent events could grow that further, yet it still only accounts for 2% of global giving.

Despite the stakes, large-scale climate philanthropy is a relatively new phenomenon. It was jump started by a \$1 billion commitment by three foundations in 2008, investments which built the funding intermediaries that play a central role in the field today. In 2020, the entry of Jeff Bezos and MacKenzie Scott marked a major shift in the landscape, while other mega-donors such as Bill Gates and George Soros made first forays into climate giving. Yet top institutional donors—mostly legacy foundations—still dominate giving in this sector.

This brief brings together expert opinion and data on U.S. grantmakers’ domestic giving on climate change and clean energy. It examines the philanthropic landscape, including who is giving—mostly private foundations and major individual donors; and who is getting—receiving the most are the field’s major intermediaries and large legacy environmental organizations, though with growing amounts to groups focused on environmental justice, movement- and power-building, and working with front-line, often BIPOC, communities. Racial justice and equity dominate discussions of the sector’s top issues, strategies and trends, but funding levels do not yet match that attention. Analysis finds advocacy is the field’s most funded strategy, while the largest share of funding has been directed to approaches aimed at creating an enabling environment for action on climate, followed by developing sustainable energy.

On all these fronts, this brief offers an overview of what U.S. philanthropy is doing within America’s borders to advance action on climate change.

Who’s Giving:

- Private foundations and major individual donors dominate philanthropic giving on climate change and clean energy in the United States.
- The field has traditionally been top-heavy, with the top 10 foundations accounting for half of all funding in recent years, and the top five funders making up 70% of that amount.
- Jeff Bezos became the largest climate funder in 2020; other major donors, such as MacKenzie Scott, could significantly remake the philanthropic landscape in the coming years, though tech and finance billionaires already play a large role in the space.
- Funding intermediaries play a central role in this space, with a couple of leading institutional pass-through organizations and a wide range of funds focused on environmental justice.

Who's Getting

- Large legacy environmental organizations, often called “big greens,” whose leadership and staff tend to be mostly white, receive the majority of funds in this sector, though calls for a broader distribution of funding, particularly to BIPOC-led groups, are growing.
- Funding intermediaries, including some that serve as the climate arms of major philanthropies, receive and direct a substantial share of the funding in the field.
- Environmental justice is an emerging focus for funders, including via regrants, though it remains to be seen whether it is an enduring priority.
- Funding is inequitably distributed geographically, with the Northeast, Pacific Coast and Midwest leading, while areas like the Gulf Coast receive minimal funding.

The Big Issues and Funding Trends

- A wide range of issues are at play in climate philanthropy circles, including racial equity and inclusion, the role of grassroots movements, ensuring a just transition, the future of fossil fuels, threats to democracy, and new technologies.
- Advocacy is the top funding strategy among climate grantmakers, accounting for 40% of funding, more than triple the next largest category, according to EGA.
- Public engagement has been the most funded issue, followed by support for clean electricity, according to ClimateWorks.

Equity in the Sector

- Racial justice and equity is the most widely discussed topic in the sector, with many funders making internal and funding shifts, though there's no evidence yet of a significant realignment of funding.
- Studies find that a tiny fraction of climate funding, between 1.3% and 7%, goes to environmental justice groups, and BIPOC-led groups have historically received far less support than white-led organizations.
- Many ascribe the racial funding gap to the reality that the largest green funders and groups are less diverse than America, with people of color representing just 27% of staff, versus 40% of the U.S. population, according to surveys.

Fundraising Now

- There is a sense of urgency in climate change fundraising, which is more pronounced than for many other social change movements, because of the need to bring massively more philanthropic resources to bear before disaster is unavoidable.
- Large, legacy environmental organizations are still the main beneficiaries of philanthropic dollars for climate change and clean energy, but climate justice fundraisers are increasing their share of giving.
- One trend that may be taking root, at least among the lucky few nonprofits with long-term funder relationships and secure multi-year funding, is giving more critical feedback to foundations.

Time is running out not just for philanthropy, but humanity, to avert catastrophic levels of global warming. In the first years of a crucial decade for the climate, the lack of equity and inclusion represented by who

receives grants and who makes those calls is the biggest weakness and the greatest opportunity to many in the field. Many funders and advocates are pushing for expanding funding to BIPOC-led groups working in front-line communities, while calling for changes to the largely white leadership at top green funders and groups. Matthew Nisbet, a communications professor at Northeastern University, and others say that philanthropy has ignored controversial but promising approaches, from nuclear energy to geoengineering, to address the climate emergency.

The priorities of new mega-donors, such as whether they listen to appeals to emphasize racial equity and movement strategies versus doubling down on existing institutions or even forging new paths, will shape the future of this sector. With funding still at low levels despite recent new arrivals, many urge foundations to leverage all means to expand their impact and grantmaking, whether via expanding impact investments, committing to divest, reducing requirements and restrictions on funding, or even spending down.

The Biden-Harris administration's emphasis on an all-government approach to climate change and prioritization of environmental justice has sparked optimism, though the window of opportunity is narrow. Disinformation by fossil fuel companies stymied action on climate change for decades, and now many funders fear false claims on social media will continue to sow doubts, divide the public on whether action is needed and prevent a political coalition from coming together to confront climate change.

Amid these threats, there are signs that climate change is increasingly seen as an intersectional, cross-cutting issue that deserves prime consideration by all foundations, regardless of their funding priorities. With climate-fueled fires, heat waves and floods wreaking havoc around the world, there is no time to lose.

Introduction

Sea levels are rising, forests are burning, temperatures are climbing, and emissions remain high. Philanthropy, like other sectors, has been slow to prioritize the climate emergency, but there are some promising signs. Funding for climate change and clean energy in the United States has spiked significantly in recent years, with institutional funding increasing and a number of major individual donors making huge commitments. Yet funding for climate change mitigation accounts for only 2% of philanthropic dollars, according to a report from ClimateWorks Foundation, far less than what one might expect for an existential threat.

A small number of foundations have funded climate and energy issues dating back decades. But a five-year, \$1 billion commitment in 2008 from the Hewlett, Packard and McKnight foundations [jump-started](#) funder engagement on climate change. Those three, along with a handful of other private foundations, dominated the space for many years. A large share of funding flowed through two intermediaries, the Energy Foundation and the ClimateWorks Foundation. This group prioritized a top-down, technology-centered approach focused on negotiating major climate policies and seeding innovation. A 2007 report, “[Design to Win](#),” was a seminal document in formalizing these pathways.

But failure to secure either an agreement at the Copenhagen climate talks or a cap-and-trade bill in the U.S. Congress led to a profound reassessment in 2012. As ClimateWorks [reinvented itself](#), the major foundations gradually began to support a wider range of groups and more resources were devoted to expanding the funding community. Yet critics from all sides charge that little has changed.

Nisbet [argues](#) that top funders remain insular and overwhelmingly focused on climate change as an environmental pollution problem, which has led to a “dangerous path dependency” that prioritizes renewable energy and ignores nuclear energy, carbon capture and geoengineering. Others in the field say funders continue to underfund climate movements, overemphasize technical solutions, underinvest in communities of color and have all but ignored climate adaptation.

The events of 2020 reshaped the climate philanthropy landscape anew. The entry of Jeff Bezos and MacKenzie Scott added significant new centers of power. Bezos’ first round of gifts made him the space’s largest donor, while Scott’s climate grants rivaled the annual giving of some of the space’s biggest institutional players. Massive foundations with living donors, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Open Society Foundations, made new commitments to climate change. The COVID-19 pandemic was a devastating preview of the costs of not preparing for catastrophe. And racial justice movements in the U.S. and abroad awakened many to the reality that vulnerable communities of color are on the front lines of climate impact.

A long overdue sense of urgency is growing. The scientific consensus formalized in the Paris Agreement gives the world’s nations until 2030 to roughly halve emissions from recent levels. The arrival of the Biden Administration, which has made climate a central theme of its political agenda from foreign policy to domestic spending, has created new optimism and opportunities after four years of climate denial and regression under the Trump administration.

Climate change and clean energy philanthropy encompass a wide range of issues and focus areas. Advocacy and public engagement are the most funded strategic approaches, according to data from the Environmental Grantmakers Association (EGA) and ClimateWorks, respectively. Investment in clean energy focusing on electrification and opposition to fossil fuel infrastructure, whether through public campaigns or litigation, are also among the most well-funded areas, based on ClimateWorks data. A variety of other efforts have significant or rising support. Food and agriculture philanthropy focused on climate is growing. Climate finance is attracting interest from some of the field's largest players. Several technological approaches are gaining adherents, including carbon dioxide removal and geoengineering. Natural solutions, like regenerative agriculture and tree planting, have attracted both veteran climate funders and newcomers.

Equity and social justice represent perhaps the most discussed issue in climate philanthropy over the last few years, building on a growing discussion. The events of 2020—George Floyd's murder, racial justice uprisings, the inequities of the pandemic—brought new attention and action. One primary point of contention has been the overwhelming support given to the nation's largest—and largely white-led and staffed—environmental organizations, sometimes pejoratively referred to as the 'big greens.' Groups led by people of color, particularly environmental justice organizations, have long struggled to get substantial funding, let alone support at the level of the field's largest players. As new money floods into the space, it risks exacerbating this divide, particularly given that most of the philanthropic sector awards gifts based on recent budget size.

Diversity, equity and inclusion within the staff and senior leadership of climate and energy philanthropy are interrelated concerns in the field. Many major climate funders and groups are led by white men and, with some exceptions, many institutions' boards and staff are predominantly white and do not resemble the United States in their racial/ethnic composition. Many funders and advocates consider this reality a contributing factor to the field's historic strategic approach; much more support goes to technology, research and market-oriented solutions, while much less flows to grassroots organizations, power-building groups and community-based solutions.

The geographic diversity of giving is also unbalanced and can exacerbate racial disparities. The smallest share goes to the Gulf Coast region, whose Black, Indigenous and people of color populations are among the nation's most climate-impacted communities. Philanthropic power in the United States is concentrated where wealth is (i.e., mostly cities in coastal states) and this appears to lead to more giving in those areas. The Northeast, home to America's first fortunes and the power center of New York City, gets the biggest share of environmental funding, with 17%, according to EGA. Environmentalism's cultural sway on the Pacific Coast (tied for second with 11%) may be another force, along with ballooning tech fortunes. Unlike industries in which corporate titans have given toward marginally mitigating the impact of their businesses (see giving by Mark Zuckerberg and Jack Dorsey for public journalism and democracy), the massive wealth generated by the fossil fuel industry in states like Texas and Louisiana has not produced comparable investments in local or global climate action.

The recognition that climate is an intersectional issue is growing and spreading beyond environmental funders. Health funders, such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, are supporting climate responses to improve health outcomes. Wave after wave of worsening disasters are making community foundations like the Greater New Orleans Foundation realize a more robust climate-informed strategy is needed. And climate funders of all stripes are publicly recognizing the racial justice element of the crisis, though money has been slower to shift. “There’s been an understanding and growing awareness that it’s intersectional, that the work on climate is in itself a justice effort,” said Dan Chu, executive director of the Sierra Club Foundation.

While this brief focuses on funding directly related to climate change and clean energy, there are few funding areas that are not impacted by the growing climate emergency. We cover aspects of these intersections throughout IP’s State of American Philanthropy series, with particular attention in our three other environmentally oriented briefs: Ocean and Freshwater Conservation, Conservation and Pollution, and Animals and Wildlife. It should also be noted that while climate change and clean energy are separate priorities under Candid’s tracking system, there is considerable overlap in the two spheres, and this report has mostly treated the field as a single community.

Many new funders have entered the climate and energy philanthropy landscape in recent years, but the space remains dominated by a few big players. Hewlett and Packard remain two of the field’s leading funders, along with the Sea Change, MacArthur, JPB and Kresge foundations, plus Bloomberg Philanthropies. Half of all funding comes from the top 10 funders, according to IP’s

analysis of Candid data. The new entrants mentioned earlier, whether individuals like Bezos and Scott, or the wealthy donors behind institutions, such as Bill Gates and George Soros, add important new resources, but reinforce the dynamic of top-heavy dominance within the funding landscape.

This report focuses on domestic grantmaking by U.S. institutional grantmakers, although that is only one element of climate philanthropy—and many major U.S. grantmakers have turned their funding attention abroad. Historically the world’s largest emitter, the U.S. is currently the second-largest source of carbon emissions in the world, with about 15% of emissions, and it receives about a third of all climate and energy philanthropy. An October 2021 report by ClimateWorks Foundation, “[Funding trends 2021: Climate Change Mitigation Philanthropy](#),” found organizations in the United States received about \$435 million of the estimated \$1.3 billion given on average annually by foundations between 2015 and 2020.

The Lay of the Land

Who's Giving

Climate change and clean energy employ somewhat different strategies but aim to achieve the same goals, and both have largely the same funders and are treated in this brief as essentially a single funding area. This giving is dominated in the United States by private foundations and individual donors, with funding intermediaries playing a major role in directing funds. Such funders account for the major share of funding from philanthropy, though the sector has become less top-heavy in recent years, and smaller funders have long played influential roles. Community foundations play a minor but growing role, while corporate philanthropy is relatively minimal.

The top 10 institutional funders accounted for half of all U.S. grantmaking on climate change and clean energy between 2014 and 2018, giving a combined \$1.3 billion during that period, according to an Inside Philanthropy analysis of Candid data. Nearly 70% of that funding came from the top five funders, which included the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Energy Foundation, [Sea Change Foundation](#) and [MacArthur Foundation](#).

Major individual donors are a bigger force than ever in climate change philanthropy. Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' nearly \$800 million round of gifts in 2020 was half as big as all foundation grants on climate from the year before and his \$10 billion fund is larger than all but a few philanthropies. MacKenzie Scott, author and ex-wife of Bezos, gave \$125 million to climate in 2020, as much as many major foundations, and her giving is expected to accelerate. To date, both have largely given to the

same organizations as institutional philanthropy, but these two and other mega-donors—mind-bogglingly wealthy individuals who make massive sector-shifting gifts—could reshape the philanthropic landscape for climate change work in coming years.

10 Institutional Funders to Know: Climate Change and Clean Energy¹

William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

David and Lucile Packard Foundation

Energy Foundation

Sea Change Foundation

John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

JPB Foundation

Kresge Foundation

Bloomberg Philanthropies

Barr Foundation

Heising-Simons Foundation

Source: Candid

Intermediary funds play a central role in climate change and clean energy philanthropy. Energy Foundation, which serves as a regrantor for many top institutional and individual givers, is both the top recipient and one of the leading grantmakers in the field, according to IP's Candid analysis. ClimateWorks Foundation plays a similar role, though its U.S. portfolio is much smaller than its international projects, and it is an influential source of information and resources. A long list of smaller intermediaries, most focused on environmental justice, are also important players. Three funds that received \$43 million from Bezos last year are among the most prominent: Climate and Clean Energy Equity Fund, Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice and The Solutions Project.

Community foundations are playing a growing role in climate change grantmaking, although they account for a minor share of total funding. Many institutions, such as the Greater New Orleans Foundation and Hawaii Community Foundation, have been drawn to the issue in part through local disasters. They have also been a channel to respond to local weather impacts, such as reduced snowpack, and have proven adept at navigating challenging political environments.

Funding for climate change and clean energy has risen by nearly 50% in recent years, according to Inside Philanthropy's analysis of Candid data from 2014 to 2018. Funding barely budged in the first three years of that period, averaging \$443 million. Grantmaking subsequently jumped, rising at least 20% in 2017 and 2018, to \$551 million and \$660 million, respectively. Evidence suggests this rapid increase has continued, not just from institutional philanthropy, but also with the entry of mega-givers like Bezos, Scott and [Laurene Powell Jobs](#).

Nearly half (45%) of the respondents to IP's August 2020 survey who work as funders or fundraisers in the climate and clean energy field indicated that philanthropic interest and funding levels are increasing in their field. About a third (33%) indicated the field was losing traction, either due to greater attention on COVID and racial justice (23% of total) or waning funding interest overall (11%). The smallest share (23%) felt funder interest was unchanged in recent years. (Numbers exceed 100% due to rounding.)

Philanthropic funding complements a variety of other sources of revenue for nonprofits, including individual donations, government grants and contracts, corporate sponsorships or brand partnerships, and programming fees (see the Who's

Getting section for discussion of private giving relative to other forms of revenue for typical climate and energy nonprofits).

Who's Getting

Large environmental organizations and funding intermediaries receive the bulk of funding in this space. The former's large share of grant dollars is a long-running flashpoint in this space. Those groups, most founded in the 1960s and largely white in staff and leadership, are critiqued on a variety of fronts, including their historical focus on wilderness preservation over human impacts, neglect of environmental justice, top-down policy approach and corporate friendliness. The dominance of these groups is also part of a broader racial funding divide in the environmental movement. Environmental funders and grantees have long been "overwhelmingly white."

Inside Philanthropy August 2020 Survey

"The philanthropic community has tremendous opportunities to invest in the connection of climate change and environmental justice to public health, mental health and systemic change."

—Fundraiser, San Fernando, California

Serious geographic divides also exist, some mirroring the racial gaps. New attention to the dominance and racial disparities of mainstream groups is starting to lead to shifts in funding, which available data does not yet reflect. But there is much ground to make up. It remains to be seen if the trend will hold, let alone build.

The nation's largest environmental organizations, often derisively called "big greens," are a dominant presence among the 10 recipients of climate and clean energy funding based on Candid data,

including Environmental Defense Fund, Natural Resources Defense Council, and Nature Conservancy. Top recipients also include the philanthropic arm of the Sierra Club. While their U.S. work on climate and energy may be smaller or less explicit, other groups that receive significant funds for climate change work include the National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation, Earthjustice and World Wildlife Fund. [Save Our Environment](#), a collaborative effort by these groups and others (legally called the Partnership Project) is another top 10 recipient. These groups have long dominated the funding hierarchy. EGA, for instance, has found that the top 5% of climate and energy grantees have long received 50% of such funding from EGA members.

10 Grantees to Watch: Climate Change and Clean Energy²

Energy Foundation

ClimateWorks Foundation

Alliance for Climate Protection

Sierra Club Foundation

Environmental Defense Fund

Natural Resources Defense Council

Partnership Project

Climate Central

Elevate Energy

Nature Conservancy

Source: Candid

Funding intermediaries are a major and growing force in climate philanthropy. As noted above, the Energy Foundation and ClimateWorks Foundation are the most prominent. The pair topped the list of grant recipients for the five-year period, receiving \$385 million and \$303 million in grants, respectively, significantly more than the rest of the top 10 recipients combined, according to Candid

data. Much of that funding is designated for specific projects, but each has some degree of discretionary funding. There are also a wide range of environmental-justice-focused regrantors, some formed and backed by foundations, others started by individual donors, and most led by people of color. As noted above, three of the largest are the Climate and Clean Energy Equity Fund, the Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice, and The Solutions Project, each of which received \$43 million from Bezos. Many smaller national and regional climate funds, as well as identity-based groups, also play important roles in the space.

The line between environmental justice groups and intermediaries can be nuanced. A survey of 27 intermediaries focused on environmental justice and grassroots organizations found respondents had a collective revenue of \$80 million, of which roughly a third (\$27 million) is regranted. The analysis found such groups are “vastly under-resourced” despite the impact of their grantees; their grant dollars are spread thinly; most are focused on climate and energy; and support is particularly scarce in rural states and the South, among other findings. Arabella Advisors prepared a 2017 study titled “Building a Smarter and Stronger Environmental Movement: How Environmentally Focused Intermediaries and Funders Can Better Serve the Grassroots.”

Due to such funds and greater attention to equity, funding for environmental justice is growing. It is difficult to fairly summarize the wide range of organizations receiving support. They include national networks like the National Black Environmental Justice Network and Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, and regional players like the Miami Climate Alliance and the PA Climate Equity Table. Such climate funding is also going to

groups for whom it is but one issue they work on, such as Mi Familia Vota and Black Voters Matter. But this new support builds on a small base. One of the few and frequently cited studies found only 1.3% of grants from 12 national grantmakers went to environmental justice organizations between 2016 and 2017. Moreover, 91% of environmental justice funding went to organizations for whom it is not their primary mission, according to that study, which was led by Building Equity and Alignment for Impact (BEA).

Analysis from EGA suggests roughly half of climate and energy funding from its members goes to domestic organizations. But that funding is unequally distributed around the country. Nearly half of all funding goes to federal or multi-region efforts, according to EGA's Tracking the Field database. Of the remaining targeted funding, three regions receive the bulk, with the Northeast getting 17% and the Pacific Coast and Midwest receiving 11%. Remaining regions receive increasingly smaller portions: Southeast (6%), Southwest (3%), Northwest (3%). The Gulf Coast comes in at just 0.2%. The BEA study offers supporting evidence of the stark regional resource disparities, finding national grantmakers awarded \$1.3 billion in environmental grants over the time period examined versus just \$134 million and \$12 million by Midwest and Gulf South funders, respectively.

Nonprofits' reliance on philanthropy varies according to type. While the large and well-known environmental groups such as Nature Conservancy and the Sierra Club differ in their approaches, all bring in substantial individual donations and membership dues. Certain grassroots groups also rely on individual donations. Government contracts and grants are typically only available to the largest organizations, those with the structure

Funder Spotlight



With the establishment of his \$10 billion Bezos Earth Fund and its nearly \$800 million first round of gifts, Jeff Bezos became the largest climate funder on the planet in 2020. The fund will spend down over the next decade, guaranteeing even larger grants to come and providing a powerful example of philanthropic urgency. Initial grants went primarily to mainstream environmental organizations, reinforcing the field's current structure. Yet a fifth of his giving went to environmental justice groups, with most gifts many multiples greater than those organizations had received in their entire history. While such sums pale in comparison to the impact of Amazon's footprint and practices, Bezos is poised to exert enormous influence on the climate landscape over the next 10 years.

and systems necessary to apply for and win such awards. Private sector money, whether in the form of corporate sponsorships or brand partnerships, is also a source of revenue, again largely for name-brand groups. Some groups also do outings and other events to raise funds.

"Federal and private sector investment in climate mitigation and adaptation are critical and they dwarf philanthropy's contributions," said Lois DeBacker, managing director of environment at the Kresge Foundation. "We in philanthropy need to be mindful of that context and then invest accordingly."

Giving & Getting Deeper Dive

Private foundations account for most institutional grants on climate change and energy. Between 2014 and 2018, according to Candid, the top 10 included the following institutions: Hewlett Foundation (\$268 million), Packard Foundation (\$195 million), MacArthur Foundation (\$130 million) and Kresge Foundation (\$90 million). (For more details on these funders, including our definition, see the private foundations section.)

Several philanthropies controlled by individuals or families also rank among the top players in climate philanthropy. Barbara Picower’s JPB Foundation (\$104 million) and Mike Bloomberg’s Bloomberg Philanthropies (\$77 million) are both among the top 10. A single family, the Simons, is another serious force. Nat Simons and Laura Baxter-Simons are the lone board members for their Sea Change Foundation, which is among the nation’s top 10 climate and energy donors, with \$136 million in grants over five years, based on Candid data. Liz Simons, her husband, Mark Heising, and their daughter, Caitlin, make up the board for the Heising-Simons Foundation, another top 10 donor, which gave \$58 million over that time period. Both couples are signatories to the Giving Pledge.

Aside from the top givers, an assortment of progressive funders has been influential in climate and energy philanthropy despite relatively small budgets. Wallace Global Fund has [helped push](#) philanthropy to divest from fossil fuels. Libra Foundation, while a newer institution, has been a [champion of environmental justice and community-based solutions](#). [Solidago Foundation](#) and [Chorus Foundation](#) have taken similar roles. Various grantmakers have carved out niches with narrower topics. Pisces Foundation, for instance, is touted for its work on super-pollutants. “Funders

with more modest funding but who are hyper-focused on an area can both help make great advances in that area and attract others into that space,” said [Shawn Reifsteck](#), vice president of global intelligence at ClimateWorks.

Beyond community foundations, place-based funders have played prominent roles in climate philanthropy. Boston-based Barr Foundation, which focuses on the Northeast, is frequently mentioned as a model for outsized impact. It is also among the top 10 U.S. climate and energy donors, with \$58 million in climate grants over the five-year period studied in IP’s analysis of Candid data. The Minneapolis-based McKnight Foundation—which was one of the three funders that supercharged climate funding in 2008—and Cleveland-based George Gund Foundation are both [recognized](#) for their work in the Midwest.

THE
KRESGE
FOUNDATION

“Federal and private sector investment in climate mitigation and adaptation are critical and they dwarf philanthropy’s contributions. We in philanthropy need to be mindful of that context and then invest accordingly.”

—Lois DeBacker, managing director, Environment program, Kresge Foundation.

The foundations generated by Rockefeller family wealth have also played a highly visible role in climate and energy philanthropy, focused on oil divestment and pipeline opposition. Rockefeller Brothers Fund [divested](#) from fossil fuels in 2014 and Rockefeller Family Fund followed suit two years later. The family’s flagship philanthropy, Rockefeller Foundation, which was founded with the profits of the forced sale of John D. Rockefeller’s oil monopoly, has also taken action. In late 2020, it announced a [\\$1 billion investment](#)—mostly abroad

—in renewable energy. A few months later, it shared its intention to [fully divest](#) its now \$6 billion endowment from fossil fuels. Growald Family Fund, another Rockefeller family philanthropy, has a laser focus on clean energy. Rockefeller philanthropy has also backed efforts to [pressure banks](#) to stop financing fossil fuel companies and pushes to [stop oil pipelines](#) and other fossil fuel infrastructure.

Beyond the nation’s largest environmental organizations and intermediaries, there is limited public data on which types of groups receive the most climate and energy funding. Yet it is clearly a diverse space. There are national, regional and state-level think tanks, policy and advocacy groups, and movement support organizations. Examples range from the U.S. Climate Action Network to the Southern Environmental Law Center. Local and grassroots organizations, some focused on equity, are another category. Universities and other research institutions often receive funding for scientific work and other studies. For instance, King Philanthropies [recently set up](#) a climate action initiative at MIT. Climate news outlets are favored recipients. National, state and local networks of professionals and practitioners also receive funding. One example is the Urban Sustainability Directors Network.

Some of the best-known advocacy groups that have sprung up over the last decade include [350.org](#) and youth-led groups like [Sunrise Movement](#) and [Extinction Rebellion](#). They have injected overdue urgency into the climate discussion while building grassroots political support. Sunrise, notably, helped launch the Green New Deal. Another notable group, [Climate Mobilization Project](#), argues for treating climate like a wartime response.

Identity-based groups, such as the [Indigenous Environmental Network](#), are also an important presence. Such movement organizations have played a leading role in advancing the climate conversation, but none of them shows up on Candid’s top 10. However, the third-leading recipient is Al Gore’s effort to seed climate activism, the education and advocacy nonprofit Climate Reality Project, a.k.a. Alliance for Climate Protection, with \$122 million over the period. IP’s 2020 survey found that about 7 in 10 funders and fundraisers in the climate and energy field believe “grassroots movement-building and cross-movement organizing” merit more investment.

Climate journalism has been a key interest for many funders. Outlets including Island Press, *Grist*, *The Guardian* and Climate Nexus have received foundation support. According to Candid, Climate Central, a news organization, is among the top 10 recipients of climate and clean energy funding, with \$31 million over the period examined. Relatively small foundations have supported this area. For instance, Compton Foundation in Los Angeles has [funded](#) storytelling on climate change and Park Foundation in Ithaca, New York, has [backed](#) equitable climate journalism.

Certain funders have supported still-nascent and controversial technological climate efforts, though most of these fields remain quite small. Harvard’s Solar Geoengineering Research Program has long been a top grantee on efforts that aim, to put it simply, to cool the planet by reflecting sunlight, while the nonprofit SilverLining recently [emerged](#) as a significant regrantor. Carbon dioxide removal technologies are another emerging area, with \$25 million in grants according to ClimateWorks, which runs a CDR fund.

Funders have also backed efforts to battle the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure. Some are funding activism along proposed pipelines, such as [Minnesota’s Line 3](#). Others have rallied philanthropists to [pressure their banks](#) to end fossil fuel financing. Bloomberg Philanthropies’ Beyond Coal campaign sought to end the use of the hydrocarbon, largely through litigation, but with some organizing elements, and has now expanded the campaign under the name [Beyond Carbon](#). Bloomberg and Hewlett, among others, have also worked on climate finance, looking for philanthropic leverage points to increase capital flowing to investments in green energy, infrastructure and mitigation.

There are a variety of efforts to track climate change and energy grantmaking. Using different pools of data and different terminology, they offer viewpoints on the field’s biggest issues and funding priorities. Moreover, most of the data collected by these groups is not shared publicly. As with all such tracking, the data does not reflect the latest trends, as there is typically a lag of a year or more. Some focus solely on climate mitigation—efforts to reduce emissions—while others also include adaptation to help people adjust to expected changes, which receives far less philanthropic attention.

Candid’s broad funding buckets offer a birds-eye view of this space. In practice, grants within its big buckets are likely often overlapping and intersecting, but the numbers offer a sense of overarching priorities. Of all climate and clean energy funding, the bulk goes specifically to climate change, which received \$423 million between 2014 and 2018, according to IP’s analysis. Clean energy came in second with \$350 million

over the five-year period. Rounding out the top five were energy efficiency (\$151 million), policy (\$137 million) and carbon emissions (\$85 million).

Subject	Amount Funded
Climate Change	\$422.72M
Clean Energy	\$350.17M
Energy Efficiency	\$150.61M
Policy	\$137.13M
Carbon Emissions	\$84.50M

Source: Candid

Data from ClimateWorks Foundation’s grants database, provided to Inside Philanthropy, offers a more nuanced view of the top issues. It finds the top priority for domestic funding for climate mitigation by U.S. funders between 2015 and 2020 was public engagement, which includes communications, advocacy and working with businesses, receiving \$110 million. Other leading priorities include clean electricity (\$70 million); efforts to challenge fossil fuel use and development (\$55 million); and support for lower emissions from buildings and cities (each receiving \$25 million). Each figure represents the average support during that time period.

Stepping back, you can get a different sense of the field by looking at the amounts granted within the four broad categories ClimateWorks uses: enabling environment (\$170 million); sustainable energy (\$166 million); cross-sectoral work—which includes grants focused on cities, carbon dioxide removal and super-pollutants—(\$75 million) and land use (\$20 million). Note that ClimateWorks’ data focuses exclusively on climate mitigation funding.

Environmental Grantmakers Association’s Tracking the Field project offers a different perspective on leading issues. EGA’s database, tags grants with both primary and secondary issues, and the latter provides a guide to some of the dominant themes. Among grants whose primary tag is climate, secondary labels suggest some of the largest issues are climate justice (7% of grants), climate resilience (5%) and air quality (3%). Within energy grants, the major subtheme is sustainable communities (6%), which includes urban energy use, green buildings, power grids and solar panels. However, the largest share of these grants supports a broader area: Some 17% of energy grants carry a secondary label of “general environment” and 10% of climate grants have that tag.

Finally, Arabella Advisors’ survey of intermediaries presents the perspective of grassroots environmental-justice-focused regrants. After energy and climate, the top issues for groups were environmental health (74% of groups), sustainable communities (66%), toxics (51%), sustainable ag and food (40%) and transportation and water (each with 37%).

The Big Issues & Beyond

Racial equity and justice is easily the most-discussed topic in climate and energy philanthropy right now, and it is an issue that touches all corners of environmental grantmaking. Shifts have come, particularly in the [year since George Floyd’s murder](#) sparked uprisings against systemic racism across the United States, as covered in more detail in this brief’s Perspective on Equity section.

Perhaps most intertwined with the discussion of equity is the continued debate over whether grassroots movements, particularly front-line community organizations and BIPOC-led groups,

are receiving a fair share of the philanthropic pie. Efforts to ensure a just transition to a clean energy economy has also been a leading concern. Recent entrants include [Open Society Foundations](#), which pledged that such work would be part of its new climate commitment.

Connecting with a public that is variously disengaged, uninformed or misled about climate change remains a top issue—and leading funding priority—for philanthropy. Fossil fuel companies and foundations have financed climate denial dating back decades. Some anti-immigrant philanthropies [pose as environmentalists](#). More broadly, public support for the transformations needed remains highly partisan.



“We have seen an increased and very deliberate pushback by fossil fuel interests and other stakeholders. It’s more than just climate change. We’re seeing particularly the cultural aspects that are tied to this.”

—Mijo Vodopic, a senior program officer, MacArthur Foundation

Some climate funders highlight threats to democracy such as voter suppression and uneven voter turnout as leading issues for the field. Successful climate action depends on government intervention—both in investment and policy—and many worry unfair elections will prevent necessary and urgent actions. Several environmental justice funds have [long supported voter organizations](#) and more money could flow this way.

Confronting not only fossil fuel infrastructure, as noted above, but the interests and industries behind it is a growing issue for grantmakers, particularly those on the progressive end. Some see a battle that goes deeper than surface issues. “We have seen an increased and very deliberate pushback by fossil fuel interests and other stakeholders,” said Mijo Vodopic, a senior program officer at the MacArthur Foundation who works on climate issues. “It’s more than just climate change. We’re seeing particularly the cultural aspects that are tied to this.”

Collaborative Spotlight



When the pandemic forced transit agencies around the country to close, leaving many people without transportation options and operators deep in red ink, the Mobility and Access Collaborative—a program at the Funders Network—jumped into action. It launched a Mobility Fund, granting \$700,000 to mobility advocacy groups. The aim was to bring a rider’s voice to bear on government decisions about investment in public transportation infrastructure as people returned to work and school.

Climate adaptation is viewed by some as an underfunded front in the climate emergency. Big players such as ClimateWorks have put a lot of attention on mitigation—tackling problems, particularly emissions—but few institutions have focused on adaptation, or helping populations adjust to the changes that are underway and expected. John Thomas, senior associate, philanthropic services practice, CEA Consulting, believes this is because environmental

philanthropy is drawn to the quantifiable metrics that are more common in mitigation than adaptation. “The adaptation work is more interesting, definitely more complicated, certainly more political and social,” he said.

A number of people in climate philanthropy question whether their sector is doing enough to meet the moment and the existential threat facing humanity. As is commonly cited, only 2% of global philanthropic giving goes to climate change mitigation. “We still operate with these corporate values around risk and return on our investment,” said Gloria Walton, president and CEO of the Solutions Project. “We’re in this movement that requires our values to be more transformational.”

The above only scratches the surface of the many issues at play in climate circles today. Funders are looking at how to deepen the role of Indigenous people in climate response, [fossil fuel infrastructure fights](#) and land conservation, most recently joined by the [Walton Family Foundation](#). Greenwashing is frequently voiced as a concern on issues ranging from [tree-planting campaigns](#) to [corporate backing for carbon capture](#). As noted above, debates over philanthropy’s role in controversial technologies like [solar geoengineering](#) are heating up. A perennial issue since the dawn of large-scale climate philanthropy in 2008 has been how to attract new funders to the issue.

Funder Trends & Strategies

The biggest trend in the sector is an expanded awareness of, and application of strategies related to, racial justice and equity. As covered in more detail in the Perspectives on Equity section below, over the last year, funders have issued statements, run DEI trainings and hired new staff, accelerating

change there will be in funding recipients and decision makers. The nation's largest environmental nonprofits, whose leadership and staff are largely white, have received the lion's share of philanthropic funding for decades. Both the groups and the largest funders are starting to say that change is needed.

"There's an acknowledgment right now that the large green organizations have been significant recipients of climate funding, more so than ever," said Jorgen Thomsen, director of climate solutions at MacArthur. "We are beginning to see a shift." Most agree these legacy organizations have a role to play. But many urge a deeper strategic reset. "If scaling the big greens was going to get us there, we would have won already," said Ashindi Maxton, executive director of Donors of Color Network.

By the numbers, advocacy has long been the leading strategy for climate and energy funders, based on EGA's member database. Advocacy consistently received about 40% of climate change and clean energy funding over the five years ending in 2018, when it received 42%. An additional 5% of funding that year went to grassroots organizing, a separate but related category in EGA's system. In sum, nearly half of all funding went to advocacy and organizing. The second-leading strategy is public education, with 14% of funding. The next-largest strategies were also the ones that grew the fastest during the five-year period. Both public policy and capacity-building/general operating support grants doubled in percentage terms over those years, each reaching 10%.

Few other public resources examine strategic approaches within climate and energy philanthropy. One of the few is Arabella Advisors'

survey of grassroots environmental justice intermediaries. Of the groups it surveyed, top strategies included alliance- and coalition-building (96% of groups), grassroots leadership development (66%), advocacy capacity-building (55%), community organizing (52%) and research and policy analysis (41%).

Inside Philanthropy

August 2020 Survey

"Climate giving is gaining momentum but still heavily focused on techno-fixes and failing to adequately fund the social movement, failing to fund aggressive work to address affluence/consumption in the Global North."

—PSO professional, Santa Rosa, California

Another window into environmental justice priorities comes from the Collaborating for Bold Possibilities report. Top strategies by the surveyed groups included policy, encompassing analysis, principles and ideas (79% of groups); organizing and storytelling/arts/narrative (both with 67%); and coalition- and alignment-building (64%).

Several other overlapping and intersecting strategies exist in the climate and energy landscape. Legal efforts are a growing area, particularly around challenging fossil fuel companies and government policy. Impact or mission investing is another strategy grantmakers have leveraged, from major grantmakers like Kresge to smaller funders such as Wallace Global Fund. Participatory grantmaking models have emerged, such as the Mosaic Initiative. Research and technology development has drawn grantmakers like the Pritzker Innovation Fund.

Funders in this space largely range from progressive to centrist. Keeping with a long-time trend, the Biden Administration has several

philanthropic connections. Former foundation staff include Jonathan Pershing, an Obama administration alumnus who just left the Hewlett Foundation to join the Biden administration's climate team, and Allison Clements, who worked at and consulted for the Energy Foundation before her appointment to lead the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. "There's always been a close connection between climate philanthropy, or at least the kind of liberal climate philanthropy, and the Democratic party, since Clinton," said Edouard Morena, a lecturer in international politics at the University of London Institute in Paris and the author of "The Price of Climate Action," a book about philanthropy's role in the Copenhagen negotiations.

The new administration and its prominent focus on climate has also brought new funders into the fold. A slew of actions, including the climate-focused infrastructure bill, the [Justice 40 pledge](#) and the [30x30 conservation goal](#), have garnered new attention and energy. "There's definitely been

Network Spotlight: When Waters Rise

Climate change may have no borders, but its impacts are felt locally. Hurricanes, storms, floods and other extreme weather helped fuel the push for the Greater New Orleans Foundation to launch [When Waters Rise](#) in 2017. A national network for community foundations, it brings together local grantmakers trying to prepare for and respond to disasters—and to do so while centering equity. The group has drawn support from national funders, like Ford Foundation, and interest from grantmakers in communities where fire, not water, is the foremost concern.

a Biden effect," Morena said. "It kind of nudged certain kinds of foundations toward climate action, or at least taking a nominal interest in climate change." EGA has seen many funders that are not traditional environmental grantmakers express interest in climate change. Efforts from all sorts of sectors are emerging. For instance, the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation in New York City is [trying to help](#) museums tackle climate change.

The growing power of the grassroots, with some organizations relying heavily on individual donations, has somewhat reduced grantmakers' influence. Even under a more favorable administration, activists are empowered to set their own agenda and demand the change they believe is necessary. "Philanthropy used to play that role of controlling the movement to a certain degree. And I think they're having a much harder time doing that recently," Morena said.

Other trends in the field include a growing reliance on intermediary organizations, as discussed earlier. Collaborations are also growing in climate philanthropy, such as the Mobility Access Network's [work on transportation](#). There is some evidence that more climate funders are providing 501(c)(4) funding, but it is, by its nature, hard to track.

Whatever individual strategies funders and nonprofits pursue, they generally agree that a big-tent strategy is essential for the sector as a whole. There are many aspects—legal work, scientific research, narrative change—to creating a winning coalition. "We really need an all-hands-on-deck approach to fighting climate change," said Lois DeBacker. "There's really no silver bullet or single strategy."

Perspectives on Equity

George Floyd’s murder, the summer of uprisings for racial justice and the inequities of the pandemic led many green funders to take first or major new steps on racial equity. Many of the space’s top 40 grantmakers issued statements on diversity and inclusion, and some on Black Lives Matter, George Floyd and/or racial justice, as [tracked](#) by the Climate Funders Justice Pledge. Many environmental foundations held diversity, equity and inclusion trainings for staff. Funders like Hewlett and Walton have appointed DEI directors for the first time. Some have made significant pledges on racial equity from other portfolios. Yet whether all those moves translate into their climate giving remains to be seen.

“What I’m not seeing is a rigorous operationalizing of equity into operations and strategy,” said Danielle Deane-Ryan, senior consultant with Donors of Color Network who has also held positions in climate-focused foundations including Hewlett, Libra and Nathan Cummings.

Data shows there’s an enormous gap to make up. As noted early, one study found top philanthropies give only 1.3% of grants to BIPOC-led environmental justice groups. A more recent report from ClimateWorks found only \$60 million of the \$1.6 billion in global philanthropic funding for climate change mitigation went to “causes supporting climate justice, just transition to a low-emissions economy, grassroots mobilization and equity.” Bezos’ gifts to such groups—five grants totalling \$160 million over roughly three years—substantially raised that level, but such grants remain a minor percentage of total climate philanthropy. Among EGA members, just 7% of all climate grants are related to environmental justice, according to their analysis.

Underfunding of BIPOC-led groups working in communities of color, who are typically hit first and worst by climate impacts, has been a moral failure and a strategic failure. Post-mortems of the failure of climate agreements to emerge from Congress or Copenhagen pointed to a lack of ground game.

Initiative Spotlight: Climate Funders Justice Pledge

DONORS OF COLOR NETWORK

According to the Donors of Color Network, top funders dedicated just 1.3% of their climate funding dollars to BIPOC-led environmental justice groups. Its Climate Funders Justice Pledge is calling on the country’s top 40 climate funders to improve grants reporting transparency and dramatically increase funding to BIPOC-led environmental groups to at least 30% within the next two years. Funders that have joined the pledge so far include the Kresge, Libra, Seventh Generation, Grove and Surdna Foundation, among many others.

“When you look at the very largest funders, there has been, in many ways, an overfocus, relatively speaking, on technical and policy design aspects of addressing the climate crisis. And an over-focusing on organizations that aren’t accountable to and don’t have experience with the harshest impacts of [climate change],” Deane-Ryan said. “You have to critically make sure to address building the power you need to enact change at different levels. And that’s the part that the biggest funders have been missing the boat on.”

There is a growing push to see existing funding distributed more equitably to include the communities facing impacts of climate change, no

matter the strategy. “We need great analysis and research, but we need it to be informed by the wisdom of the folks on the ground, as well,” said Deane-Ryan. “It’s more of an overfunding of expertise that has Ph.D.s behind it, which is incredibly valuable, but not coupled with ground-truthing it with folks on the ground.”

The Climate Funders Justice Pledge is [one new effort](#) to make the field’s funding more equitable. Launched in 2020, it asks all foundations, with a focus on the nation’s 40 largest climate funders, to commit 30% of their U.S. grantmaking on climate change to environmental justice groups led by Black, Indigenous and people of color, and to share those figures publicly. To date, eight of the top 40 grantmakers have signed on, with smaller foundations bringing the total to more than two dozen. Two of the field’s largest players, Hewlett and MacArthur, have agreed to transparency.

Inside Philanthropy August 2020 Survey

“Funders are finally seeing that climate change intersects with all the issues they care about—poverty, health, racial justice, etc.”

—Foundation Professional, El Sobrante, California

Many trace the funding disparity in part to the field’s largely white staff and leadership and the limits of their personal networks. [Green 2.0](#) has been tracking the diversity of the environmental movement’s top 40 funders and organizations since 2017. Its 2020 report found 27% of staff, 22% of senior staff, and 24% of board members, on average, were people of color. Representation has improved slightly since the organization began its work, but it’s still a far cry from the U.S. population, where people of color are a 40% share. Women, the only other demographic group tracked, accounted for

64% of staff, 56% of senior staff and 41% of board members on average. (The organization provides only combined data for philanthropy and nonprofits.)

IP’s 2020 survey suggests that most in climate and energy philanthropy see only slow progress toward greater diversity among decision makers, more influence on grantmaking from the field and more participatory grantmaking practices. Some 65% of climate and energy respondents agreed that “There are some good examples of democratization in philanthropy, but it is likely a trend that will happen very slowly over time.” Similarly, 76% agreed with the statement “Most philanthropic professionals have come to believe that racial justice is important for the sector to confront and address, but most believe that not every foundation has a mission such that it makes sense to take on racial justice.” Both were overwhelmingly the most common responses.

Environmental-justice-oriented intermediary funds have been a primary venue for foundations to channel money to grassroots groups. Major climate funders can make a large gift to a regrantor who can then parcel out the money to grassroots groups working on equity. Hewlett, Packard and other climate heavyweights have given grants to funds like the Climate and Clean Energy Equity Fund and participatory structures like the Mosaic Initiative.

Among the funders seeking to share power equitably, one measure many have taken is heeding the Jemez Principles, [a set of practices](#) first formulated at a conference of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ), Jemez, New Mexico, in 1996, which are aimed at mainstream and largely white

environmental groups working with low-income communities and people of color. The Sierra Club Foundation, for instance, uses Jemez Principles when it seeks partnerships with local groups, such as when working with the Gwich'in First Nation on Arctic protection, Chu told IP. Similar principles govern the Mosaic initiative's grantmaking. They are popular among environmental justice networks, with 76% saying they actively use Jemez Principles or similar guidelines and another 15% indicating they are moving toward using such principles, according to the Collaborating for Bold Possibilities report.

Action by climate philanthropy on elements other than racial/ethnic equity are limited. Some funders have made efforts to include other identity groups among their grantees, particularly intermediaries like the Solutions Project and the Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice. Major U.S. climate funders, including MacArthur and Kresge foundations, have signed onto the [President's Council on Disability Inclusion in Philanthropy](#) and its eight action steps. But many in the field say other areas of equity—gender, LGBTQ+, ability status—have received minimal attention overall. “The environmental community ... is just generally not as advanced on issues of equity more broadly as other sectors of the nonprofit or philanthropic world,” said Thomas. “But that’s changing.”

Leadership Spotlight: Gloria Walton



Since taking the reins at the Solutions Project in October 2020, Gloria Walton has become a leading voice for racial equity in climate philanthropy. She's written op-eds on the Biden administration's Justice40 initiative and the importance of front-line climate tech solutions. She applauds new efforts like the Climate Funder Justice Pledge's goal of directing 30% of climate grantmaking to BIPOC-led groups, but suggests aiming higher. “If we're talking about equity, then those investments have to be at least doubled,” she said. She emphasizes the differences between intermediaries with BIPOC leaders who come from and are accountable to the movement, like her own, and endowed or foundation-run regrantors. “All intermediaries aren't created equal and we aren't a monolith,” she said. With her voice backed by a \$43 million gift from Jeff Bezos, which came shortly after she arrived at the organization, Walton is positioned to shape the climate movement.

A Closer Look at Funder Types

Private Foundations

Private foundations are the dominant grantmakers in climate change and clean energy giving, accounting for seven of the top 10 funders from 2014 to 2018, according to Candid. (While some grantmakers listed in this section are associated with a founder or founding family, for the purposes of this report, we've counted institutions that do not have a majority of family members on their boards as private foundations.)

Two Silicon Valley-based foundations, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, have been the biggest institutional funders since kickstarting philanthropic giving on climate in 2008. During the five-year period examined, the pair were the two biggest givers to climate change and clean energy issues, giving \$268 million and \$195 million in domestic grants, respectively. Hewlett's environmental program focuses on addressing climate change globally, expanding clean energy and conserving the North American West. Packard, which largely uses intermediaries instead of a large team on climate, names climate change as "the defining issue of our day" and grants on a variety of topics, including clean power, transportation, energy efficiency, land use and breakthrough innovations.

Another leading private foundation is the MacArthur Foundation, which granted \$130 million on climate and clean energy between 2014 and 2018. [Climate Solutions](#) is one of the four programs the foundation refers to as a "big bet," with a focus on lowering emissions and fostering

leadership on climate. Many grantees are international, but it funds U.S. policy and innovation efforts. The foundation has recently reshaped its strategy to center equity.

A few other private foundations make the top 10 in terms of their giving to climate and clean energy over that five-year period. The Kresge Foundation (\$90 million) has been a leader in incorporating equity into its climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies, and it has a robust environmental impact investing practice. Barr Foundation (\$58 million)—a family funder that now has a majority of outsiders on its board—is considered by many to have an outsized impact despite its largely regional focus on the Boston area. (Note that for these briefs, we cover private foundations with living donors who have primary control over the institution's giving in the Major Donors section.)

Other major private foundations have been significant grantmakers on climate and energy. These include one of the nation's largest grantmakers, the Ford Foundation, though its natural resources and climate change program is focused on the Global South. Doris Duke Charitable Foundation has made climate change an element of its conservation giving and also supports natural climate solutions, among other measures. McKnight, as previously noted, is a substantial climate funder known for its work in the Midwest. Some major U.S. climate grantmakers, such as Oak Foundation, give almost exclusively abroad.

A variety of smaller private legacy funders also play an important role in this space. The Nathan Cummings Foundation has been a leader in [aligning 100% of its endowment](#) investments with its mission, an effort that includes climate-related

bets, and has backed an eclectic, [at times controversial](#), range of projects. Many such funders focus their work on specific cities and regions. The Bullitt Foundation’s wide-ranging environmental initiatives have been an important part of the climate philanthropy community in the Pacific Northwest. The Heinz Endowment and the William Penn Foundation have played important roles in the Northeast, as have the Charles Stewart Mott and George Gund foundations in the Midwest and beyond.

Private Funder Spotlight



The Nathan Cummings Foundation addresses climate change from an equity perspective and aims to “hold accountable the entrenched interests that have left our nation’s infrastructure and communities vulnerable and have stalled the energy and economic transformation we need.” Recent climate change grantees include 350.org and Amazon Employees for Climate Justice. In 2018, the foundation announced that it would begin leveraging its nearly \$500 million endowment to mission-aligned investing.

Corporate Funders

American companies are taking steps on climate change and energy, but corporate philanthropy—i.e., grants to nonprofits—in this space remains relatively limited. In recent years, net zero pledges, green energy investments, corporate alliances and other moves have become increasingly common among American businesses. Yet no corporate philanthropy ranks among the top givers, based on Candid data, and there are few prominent or influential corporate givers.

It is important to emphasize that business operations will always be the most impactful place for corporate action on climate. As [one study found](#), 100 companies—all fossil fuel producers—have [accounted for](#) 71% of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions since 1988. Philanthropic giving is virtually always outweighed by the company’s carbon footprint. At best, it is a supplement to a company’s mission. At worst, it is mere greenwashing to distract from a corporation’s true record. For instance, ExxonMobil—which funded climate denial for years—once donated to a [carbon tax advocacy group](#). “Corporate philanthropy, particularly from fossil fuel companies, feels like a bandaid on a flooding dike,” said Thomas.

While private and family foundations focused on climate and energy have grown increasingly collaborative, with a plethora of networks and groups to align action, experts say corporate philanthropy on the issue still tends not to be part of that community. “Companies that act on climate through their own foundations still do so largely on their own terms,” said David Mole, director of fundraising at The Climate Group, an international nonprofit that runs networks for businesses and government to connect on climate action. “It’s a little bit of a fragmented space.”

Other realms of philanthropy are also wary about working with corporate funders. The rash of recent net-zero pledges is promising, but leaves many skeptical. “Funders are quite interested in enforcing the 11th commandment—thou shalt not enable greenwashing as a funder,” said David Ziv-Kreger, senior director of foundation development at Ceres, which works with investors and companies to encourage action on climate. “It’s not a surprise that’s going up the flagpole as companies make voluntary commitments.”

A number of environmentally oriented clothing and household brands are known for their climate giving within the sector, though the dollar amounts are typically relatively minor. Outdoor clothing brands such as [Patagonia](#) and [REI](#) focus their giving on conservation and outdoor recreation, including many international recipients, but there are U.S. climate grantees in the mix. Both give upward of \$5 million a year overall, but grants are small, mostly between \$5,000 and \$50,000. Household brands like Seventh Generation and [Ben & Jerry's](#) are also recognized for directing some of their philanthropy toward climate.

Banks' corporate philanthropies have also given to climate change solutions, though in many cases, such funding can be criticized as greenwashing, given the banks' other impacts. [Wells Fargo Foundation](#), for instance, [has supported](#) solar power in Indigenous communities and Bank of America has backed clean energy, though [mostly globally](#), as well as [tree-planting](#). Yet both banks are among the [world's top five largest financiers](#) of fossil fuel infrastructure.

Similar examples can be found in other industries. The [grantmaking arm of Alcoa](#), the Pittsburgh-based international aluminum company, [counts](#) climate as one of three priorities in its environmental program and is known in the field for working in this space. Yet it also has settled

several multimillion-dollar pollution lawsuits. Boeing, one of the world's largest aerospace and defense contractors, [makes climate grants](#), as well.

Several corporations are backing efforts on carbon dioxide removal. For instance, shipping giant FedEx [gave \\$100 million](#) to Yale University to fund research into pulling carbon from the atmosphere using nature-based methods. Another shipping company, UPS, has similarly focused on carbon removal via [tree-planting](#). Sempra Energy—a Fortune 500 company that runs several gas providers—[donated \\$2 million](#) to the Salk Institute to support efforts to enhance the ability of plants to store carbon and adapt to a changing climate. Cisco Foundation recently made a [10-year, \\$100 million commitment](#) to addressing climate change with a focus on supporting early-stage, technology-based sustainable solutions with the potential to scale.

With many companies counting on such still-nascent technology to be able to achieve their net-zero pledges, more corporate funding may flow into this space. And the resources that corporate philanthropy can bring do make this an area worth watching. But many are concerned that companies are relying on hoped-for technologies in place of working now to decarbonize their operations.

Corporate action on climate has accelerated with the arrival of the Biden Administration,

Corporate Funder Spotlight



The UPS Foundation has planted nearly 4 million trees since 2013. In April 2021, the foundation, along with the Earth Day Network, planted 2,000 redwood seedlings in the Usal Redwood Forest in Mendocino County, California. Though the overall aim of the project is to restore the redwoods in the Usal Forest, it also addresses climate in the region as redwood forests sequester more carbon per acre than any other forests in the world.

which coincides with a growing public support for action. Yet politicization of the issue remains a barrier. “That’s been a reason that corporate philanthropy has been slow to move on climate. It’s seen as a partisan issue, and that scares some funders away,” said Jessica Boehland, senior program officer with the Kresge Foundation.

Corporate giving is typically known for seeking uncontroversial approaches such as tree-planting, and that’s no exception in climate. “A lot of what I’ve seen has been direct-service-type efforts rather than trying to change the system of how energy is delivered in this country and the structural inequalities that are inherent in that,” Deane-Ryan said of corporate funders.

For corporations looking to engage, there are opportunities for impact by combining philanthropy with the services that are unique to their businesses, Mole argued. For example, a bank can give grants and offer access to its network of technical experts. “Packaging up the money you can give with the expertise you can offer—that’s a way for corporate philanthropy to give something that regular philanthropy cannot,” he said.

Community Foundations

Place-based community foundations around the country are confronting climate change, often pushed by local impacts, particularly disasters. Most flex familiar philanthropic strengths—convening power, partnerships, catalytic investments—in locally tailored approaches to spark action. Generally, the dollars involved are small, even miniscule, compared to other segments of this space, with none among the top 10 funders. But their role in leveraging funding from

government and other sources, as well as building public support, give them greater impact than the dollar figures might suggest.

The [Community Foundation Atlas](#) found the environment writ large was the fifth-leading priority among such funders, with a 9.5% share; alternative energy accounted for another 1.5%. “One of the strengths of some community foundations has been that they really know, because they’re so place-based, the local politics and issues and players. So they’ve often been good feed funders of organizations,” Deane-Ryan said.

Inside Philanthropy August 2020 Survey

“Climate philanthropy is in a period of disruption/reconsideration of strategy and focus, with risk of losing traction on right-of-center climate investments at the very moment [that they are] most important and promising.”

—Philanthropy supporting organization professional,
Lexington, Massachusetts

Regional and national efforts have emerged to bring together community foundations around the threats they face from climate change. The constant barrage of storms that came in the wake of Hurricane Katrina led the [Greater New Orleans Foundation](#) to start a network, [When Waters Rise](#), to help community foundations, place-based funders and national grantmakers share best practices on equitably responding to disasters. A private spend-down foundation, the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, created the [Community Foundation Water Initiative](#), which, over five years, sought to help such place-based grantmakers understand how water impacts their priorities, build their knowledge and create a pooled fund on water and land use.

Disasters are a common theme among community foundations engaging more deeply on climate change. Following the 2017 hurricanes Irma and Maria, the [Puerto Rico Community Foundation](#) began to focus on climate resilience, including an initiative to create a green energy corridor in the U.S. territory that aimed to give rural communities both control over their energy and an economic boost. A hurricane and a volcanic eruption led the [Hawaii Community Foundation](#) to take similar action, while the [Foundation for Louisiana](#) was founded just six days after Hurricane Katrina and now serves as an intermediary for the region.

Community Foundation Spotlight



The Cleveland Foundation's Environment grantmaking programs include Protecting Cleveland's Freshwater, which aims to ensure that everyone in the region has access to clean, safe and affordable water; Creating a more Equitable Environment, which focuses on environmental health hazards disproportionately impacting low income neighborhoods and communities of color; and Building a Clean Energy Economy, which seeks to advance a clean energy future in the region.

The push factors can be quite specific to geography. In ski towns, for instance, reduced snowpack, which can have far-reaching economic impacts on tourism-dependent regions, is often a major factor. The [Tahoe Truckee Community Foundation](#) was pushed by a drought that decimated winter snow

conditions to start a Forest Futures initiative to create jobs while limiting forest fires. For similar reasons, [Park City Community Foundation](#) has created a climate fund, started a network of mountain towns combating climate change and helped push its home city to take measures like electrifying its bus fleet to reduce its carbon footprint.

In many cases, these efforts are finding traction in places where the political environment has been hostile to climate action. [Gulf Coast Community Foundation and Community Foundation of Sarasota County](#) launched a sustainability initiative with a long list of partners to support energy retrofits and solar projects in a county where a Democratic presidential candidate had not won since Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The [Cleveland Foundation](#), a funder in a blue city in a red state, has helped fund a microgrid, start a green bank and erect wind turbines in the Great Lakes, as well as set up a climate justice fund.

Some of the nation's largest and wealthiest community foundations have also organized programs around climate. Those include the New York Community Trust, which has an [environmental program officer](#) and has been a [leader](#) in funding grassroots environmental networks, as well as [Foundation for the Carolinas](#) and [Silicon Valley Community Foundation](#). In addition to formal programs, community foundations increasingly house donor-advised funds through which donors direct giving on climate issues. IP's 2020 survey found 42% of respondents believed funding for climate and clean energy from DAFs was increasing in importance (versus only 8% who believed it was decreasing).


Major Donors

Mega-donors—those massively wealthy individuals who make sector-shifting gifts, sometimes without establishing any visible philanthropic organization—are the biggest new entrants to climate philanthropy. And all types of major donors are the field’s biggest source of new funds. IP’s 2020 survey found 44% of respondents believed growing giving by wealthy living donors was exerting influence on the climate and clean energy field, and 46% believed such revenue was increasing in importance. As one wrote, “Jeff Bezos, the world’s richest person, became the biggest player in climate philanthropy in 2020.”

The Amazon founder’s \$10 billion Bezos Earth Fund, launched in February 2020, is now the largest climate grantmaker in the world. Its nearly \$800 million **first round** of grants was half as much as all of philanthropy gave to climate issues in 2019. To spend down, as the fund intends to do by 2030, that rate will have to increase. That puts immense power in the hands of Bezos and his fund. So far, he’s hired from the biggest groups, tapping **Andrew Steer**, the former head of World Resources Institute, to lead the fund, as well as Charlotte Pera, previously president and CEO of ClimateWorks. Both organizations were prior grantees. His gifts to date have favored large green groups, which received about 80% of the first tranche of gifts, with a focus on programs working on natural climate solutions. Yet he gave the remainder to five environmental justice intermediary funds and movement organizations, including several gifts larger than the total amount those groups had received over their entire history.

In previous decades, Bill Gates and Melinda French Gates did not make climate change a grantmaking priority at a level comparable to their foundation’s

commitments to public health and education. Yet in 2020, the duo revealed that climate change would be one of their top priorities. The Microsoft co-founder has since written a book about it (arguing for a technology-focused approach to the problem). And Breakthrough Energy, Bill Gates’ multifaceted investment and philanthropic operation, backs technology the 66-year-old believes will be essential to the climate transition, and it has recently joined several philanthropic climate pledges. The Gates’ divorce has cast uncertainty on the future of their giving and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Yet their Giving Pledge letter, not to mention Bill’s role as the pledge’s co-founder, suggests there is a lot more to come. Climate change will be a growing outlet for that giving. The major target for future climate investments will likely be philanthropic leverage points in technology development and deployment, particularly in developing countries, as well as international bodies relating to those efforts.



Funder Spotlight

11th Hour Project

The Schmidt Family Foundation

Founded by Wendy and Eric Schmidt, the 11th Hour Project is an initiative within the Schmidt Family Foundation. 11th Hour supports “two linked goals: challenging the development of fossil fuels and accelerating transformation towards a clean and equitable energy system.”

Recent grantees include the Last Chance Alliance, which received support for its work addressing the multiple health, environmental justice, and climate crises caused by the fossil fuel industry in California; and Honor the Earth, which received funding for its work in Native environmental issues.

MacKenzie Scott [redefined](#) mega-philanthropy by giving away nearly \$6 billion in 2020. Only a small share of that amount, \$125 million, went to climate change, yet the amount still places her among the major climate givers in the nation. Those grants [favored](#) the space's biggest players, who have historically advanced a policy- and market-centric vision of climate progress and are largely white-led. Of her five grants, three went to major pass-through organizations, including Energy Foundation U.S., and one to the Nature Conservancy, one of the world's wealthiest environmental nonprofits. Yet much of her other giving prioritized movement organizations led by the people most impacted, whether people of color or LGBTQ+ leaders. If that approach guides future climate giving, Scott could reshape the field as she fulfills her intention to "empty the safe."

Billionaire tech entrepreneurs loom large in the climate space. Elon Musk [showed](#) the potential scale of his impact in 2020 with a \$100 million prize for carbon capture technology, but based on what he's said, it is unlikely his giving will grow significantly in the near term. Giving by former Google CEO Eric Schmidt and his wife, Wendy, particularly through their [11th Hour Project](#), has often supported climate-related projects. Former eBay president [Jeff Skoll](#), Salesforce founder Marc Benioff and database entrepreneur [Tom Siebel](#) are among those on the [long list](#) from tech who have funded efforts related to climate and energy, though not all projects are U.S.-based. Financiers, such as hedge fund billionaire [Tom Steyer](#), are another presence. Hollywood and music celebrities are less prominent in climate, though givers like [Mark Ruffalo](#), [Leonardo DiCaprio](#) and Rihanna have played roles in the space.

Living donors also call the shots at several of the top 10 climate change and clean energy funders. Barbara Picower runs The JPB Foundation (\$104 million), which makes grants for climate through several program areas, including energy, green infrastructure, and field strengthening efforts. Bloomberg Philanthropies (\$77 million), founded by former New York City mayor and billionaire Mike Bloomberg, is particularly known for its Beyond Coal campaign, which has now expanded to Beyond Carbon, as well as its city-focused grantmaking. Bloomberg was also a leader of a recently announced \$223 million pledge by a coalition aimed at reducing methane emissions, "the largest private commitment ever toward this effort." The main component of natural gas, methane is a huge factor in climate change, emanating from uncapped oil and gas rigs, leaky natural gas pipelines and other oil and gas facilities.

More climate change mega-donors are likely on the way. Entrants from the tech sector, particularly entrepreneurs making the shift, as Gates did, from full-time corporate leaders to philanthropy, seem particularly likely. Scott's example could inspire others to embrace large-scale giving that includes climate. The [Climate Leadership Initiative](#) is an effort to recruit those potential newcomers. Created in 2019 as a spinoff of an internal ClimateWorks initiative, the nonprofit [provides](#) free guidance on climate change philanthropy to Giving-Pledge-level donors, including connecting them with peers, experts and grant opportunities. Its founding funders include some of the biggest U.S. climate donors, including MacArthur, Hewlett, Packard and Sea Change.

There are also many major donors who could expand their climate giving in the coming years. Climate has not been a traditional focus of Melinda French Gates, but its intersectional impact on [her favored issue](#), women’s empowerment, may spark more giving in that vein as she forges a separate philanthropic path following her divorce. George Soros’ Open Society Foundations recently launched a [\\$40 million justice-focused climate initiative](#). Like most of the organization’s work, it is largely international, but one target city is Los Angeles and more could be added if the initiative expands.



The ClimateWorks Foundation is both a grantee and funder of climate-related work. Having received considerable support over the years from large funders including the Bezos Earth Fund, Chan Zuckerberg Initiative and the Packard and Ford foundations, ClimateWorks gives widely to organizations tackling the climate crisis from multiple sectors. Recent grantees include the North American Council on Freight Efficiency, the Ocean Conservancy, and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development.

The Walton family members are already major environmental donors and may be poised for more giving in this space. A [new strategic plan](#) that elevates climate from the Walton Family Foundation and [backing](#) for a major ocean conservation plan by the Rob and Melani Walton Foundation may augur more grantmaking by the family in this space. The footprint and reputation of Walmart, the global retailer founded by Sam Walton, may be a push factor—and similar reasoning may drive action by other clans. “There’s growing pressure when it comes to these

foundations whose families are also connected to large corporations,” Morena said. “If they do something on climate change, it also contributes indirectly to improving the brand that’s associated with them.”

Individuals account for between two and four times more giving globally than institutional philanthropy, giving as much as \$8 billion versus \$1.9 billion in foundation grants in 2020, according to a [report](#) from ClimateWorks Foundation. Of course, certain massive gifts blur the line between those categories, most notably Jeff Bezos’ \$10 billion fund. (For the purposes of this brief, we discuss giving by institutions whose founders and family members have majority control of the board within this Major Donor section.) In that way, such mega-donors may be more appropriately considered a category unto themselves, as they increasingly dominate philanthropy and may one day match all small-scale contributions, underlining questions about their power and influence.

“They’re coming in new, with an opportunity to do something transformative,” said Maxton of big donors. “And they are still coming in and under-resourcing the communities that are most impacted. They have the opportunity to do good—and the opportunity to do bad.”

Associations & Intermediaries

There are many philanthropy-supporting organizations (PSOs) in the environmental funding space. Few focus explicitly and solely on climate change, but it is a cross-cutting concern for many networks. Energy is also an interest for certain groups’ members. Such organizations have long collaborated to connect areas of work and inform each other’s members. A [recent resource portal](#) on

climate, equity and health put together by eight partners suggests accelerating concerns may spark more multi-group collaboration.

[Environmental Grantmakers Association](#) has perhaps the broadest membership of any environmental affinity group, encompassing a wide range of green funders. Its Tracking the Field initiative is one of the few data tracking efforts in the category and offers one of the most comprehensive databases on environmental grantmaking available. According to EGA, climate and energy funding accounted for 26% of their members' giving in 2018. EGA's largely independent [Blue Sky Funders Forum](#), focused on environmental literacy and education, also plays an important role.

[Biodiversity Funders Group](#) brings together roughly 75 environmental, conservation and climate and energy grantmakers, mostly based in the U.S. With climate change helping to fuel a sixth mass extinction, the link with species survival and ecosystem health is clear. BFG's semi-autonomous initiative, [Climate and Energy Funders Group](#), is one of the few explicitly climate-focused groups.

[Health and Environmental Funders Network](#) aims to mobilize its network of grantmakers to address issues at the intersection of environmental, health and community concerns, with a focus on justice. It uses Climate and Energy as one of its four core frames for its work. Its Past Petro Funder Group, formerly known as the Fracking Working Group, focuses on communities transitioning from fossil-fuel-based economies.

[Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders](#) works with its roughly 100 members, predominantly located in the U.S., on building just

and sustainable food and agricultural systems. Given not only the threat of climate change to agriculture, but also the sector's emissions and potential as a carbon sink, climate change is one of several intersecting issues for SAFSF's members.

Inside Philanthropy

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"The philanthropic community has tremendous opportunities to invest in the connection of climate change and environmental justice to public health, mental health and systemic change."

—Fundraiser, San Fernando, California

The [Funders Network](#), formerly known as the Funders Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities, works with its roughly 200 members to foster sustainability in communities, with an emphasis on equity. Subgroups dig deeper on specific issues, such as its [Mobility and Access Collaborative](#), which works on transportation systems and helps guide the [Mobility Fund](#); or [Smart Growth California](#), a network focused on infrastructure, building and transportation development in the Golden State.

Most groups on this list function primarily or exclusively as information exchanges. Few manage major collaborative funds or consider grantmaking as part of their core missions, with the exception of The Funders Network's [Partners for Places](#) matching grant program, which helps fund local climate projects.

Many other affinity groups are also doing work related to climate and energy. Impact investing is a particularly busy area, with groups including [Confluence Philanthropy](#), [Mission Investors Exchange](#), [Prime Coalition](#) and [Catalytic Capital Consortium](#). Many groups work on ocean and

marine issues, with climate as one concern. Regional groups are also starting to take on climate. One example is [Philanthropy CA](#), which [joined](#) the group of philanthropy-supporting organizations that launched a new online resource portal on climate, equity and health.

While it is more internationally focused, The Funders Table, a network of major climate change funders, is another important power center. Facilitated by the ClimateWorks Foundation, it has roughly 20 member institutions from the U.S. and Europe and hosts occasional week-long meetings. It was formed in 2012 after the implosion and subsequent transformation of ClimateWorks after the Copenhagen climate talks ended without an agreement. The group maintains no public website, but is [mentioned](#) by its host. Other informal affinity groups on specific topics, such as finance and carbon dioxide removal, also exist in the climate space, including the Climate Emergency Shipping Coalition, also hosted by ClimateWorks.

Nearly half of all climate and energy philanthropy respondents to IP's 2020 survey said funder collaboration on those issues is increasing, with just 5% saying the opposite. But not all see collaboration as a plus. "Funders discuss issues frequently, but it does not tend to increase the amount of giving. Rather, they seek justification for the gifts they are making, and it is often simply used as due

diligence," wrote an Oregon fundraiser. Others are frustrated by the lack of transparency that characterizes many collaborations. "Funder collaboration, outside of idiosyncratic competitions, is terribly opaque," wrote a Maine fundraiser.

Intermediaries, sometimes referred to as regrantors, play a central role in climate philanthropy. The two largest institutional players are the ClimateWorks and Energy foundations. Set up in 2008 as part of a [\\$1 billion philanthropic push](#) to jumpstart the battle against climate change, [ClimateWorks](#) primarily works internationally, but it is an influential provider of resources and networking for U.S. philanthropy, as well as a top grant recipient. Though it predates the 2008 investment, [Energy Foundation](#) was another major recipient of that push, and is one of the biggest funders and recipients in the U.S. Both have historically prioritized a policy- and market-centric vision of climate progress, though both have broadened their perspective somewhat in recent years.

As previously mentioned, some of the largest national environmental-justice-focused intermediaries include the [Climate and Clean Energy Equity Fund](#), the [Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice](#) and the [Solutions Project](#), each of which received \$43 million in the first round of

Association Spotlight



Founded in 1987 by 12 foundations, Environmental Grantmakers Association (EGA) foundation members have collectively given more than \$1 billion per year annually to support environmental causes around the world. Not a grantmaking organization but rather, an intermediary, EGA has grown its membership to more than 200 foundations spread across the globe which altogether hold approximately \$200 billion in assets.

gifts from Jeff Bezos' new fund. Another prominent national group focused on grassroots is [Building Equity and Alignment for Environmental Justice](#). There are other well-known efforts, like [CLIMA Fund](#) and [Climate Justice Resilience Fund](#), that are backed by U.S. funders but work primarily or exclusively abroad. A survey by Arabella Advisors found 27 grassroots intermediaries working on environmental justice, including 11 that focus on regranting and another seven for whom it is one of their activities.

A [wide range](#) of organizations do regranting on climate and clean energy. Foundations, grassroots groups and major environmental organizations have all started funds. A few examples include the [League of Conservation Voters Education Fund](#), the [Just Transition Fund](#) and the [Fund to Build Grassroots Power](#). Not all are focused on climate. For instance, the environment is one of many priorities for the [New Venture Fund](#). Some networks do minimal grantmaking, such as [Climate Justice Alliance](#). Regional regrantors include the [Midwest Environmental Justice Network](#). Identity-based groups, such as [NDN Collective](#), which received \$12 million from Bezos, are also part of this mix. While not strictly focused on climate, the Mosaic initiative is notable for [bringing together](#) a group of small and large funders in a participatory grantmaking model to build environmental movement power.

Leadership Spotlight Nick Tilsen



President, CEO and founder of the NDN Collective Nick Tilsen was arrested in 2020 for his actions during the protests of Donald Trump's visit--which violated multiple treaties--to Mount Rushmore and the Black Hills. Tilsen faced a possible 17-year prison sentence for his actions. The charges were later dropped under the requirement that he complete a diversion program. Of the events he said:

"NDN Collective is here to do our best to stand up for Native people and build communities that create real opportunities for transformation and change. We will continue to protect our people on the streets while we create jobs, improve education, and build a more equitable future."

Fundraising Now

With a growing base of power and support, climate justice fundraisers are expanding their space in the field. Large, legacy environmental organizations are still the main beneficiaries of philanthropic dollars for climate change and clean energy, but climate justice fundraisers are finally scoring big.

One element in climate and energy fundraising that every expert IP spoke to is the sense of urgency to bring massively more philanthropic resources to bear before disaster is unavoidable. In recent years, mainstream news has covered many [splashy climate change pledges](#), along with the rise of mega-donors channeling large sums. These are important beyond the dollars, says The Solutions Project's Sarah Shanley Hope: "Big, bold commitments are key for pushing the status quo beyond the constraints that [foundations have] currently set for themselves. [They] are typically giving out the 5% minimum each year, but what would happen if every endowed foundation, especially those committed to climate, saw that we've got five to 10 years to make a transformative impact? What if they were going up to 20%? Now is the time!"

In the past year or two, new resources, most notably from the \$10 billion Bezos Earth Fund, have begun flowing toward equity and justice-oriented organizations. Critics have pointed out that, of Bezos' climate giving thus far, justice groups still represent a small percentage, and data still shows a similar dynamic in overall climate and energy grantmaking. But momentum has been shifting.

Climate justice intermediaries such as The Solutions Project are racking up more funders, and groups are organizing to encourage climate funders to do more through efforts like the [Climate](#)

[Funders Justice Pledge](#). Newer intermediaries, like the upstart [Hive Fund](#), which has backing from major players like Hewlett, MacArthur and Packard, are populating the space. Solutions Project and Hive Fund each received \$43 million from Bezos.

The [NDN Collective](#) has been a beneficiary of growing interest in providing grassroots and movement-building organizations a bigger piece of the climate and clean energy pie. A holistic effort to organize and empower Indigenous people, NDN Collective's programs aim to build resilience in Native communities against the disproportionate effects of climate change. The group's Climate Justice Campaign, which supports policy change and coalition-building to develop climate solutions based in Indigenous traditional knowledge, is a prominent strategy. NDN received a \$12 million general operating grant from the Bezos Earth Fund in 2020, as well as grants from the Equitable Recovery COVID-19 response program of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Ford Foundation's Social Bonds program, and the JPB Foundation.

NDN Collective Director of Advancement Michael Johnson speaks of the dynamic between the organization and donors who have recently taken greater interest in this space, which can be a source of inner conflict for some. But Johnson sees accepting the Bezos Earth Fund grant, for example, as taking back power from those who have "hoarded resources." He also noted that the \$791 million distributed by the Bezos Earth Fund in 2020 went mostly to large, white-led environmental organizations.

NDN Collective has introduced a framework on resiliency and strength against the

disproportionate effects of climate change that became their Community Self-Determination grants. The goal is to create infrastructure—such as clean water systems, mutual aid networks, broadband internet, and emergency planning—that will strengthen local communities before the next crisis arises. Johnson reported that staff surveyed community members and incorporated their priorities directly into the program, exemplifying how organizations led by community members can act more quickly and effectively.

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“Environmental organizations have had a growing understanding over the last few years that it is critical to have meaningful representation and engagement of diverse communities—board, staff, program, development, community engagement.”

—Philanthropy supporting organization professional,
Santa Rosa, California

Founded in 2014, The Solutions Project was among the first of several climate and equity intermediary funds that have emerged in recent years. Other funders include JPB, Surdna Foundation, and Eric and Wendy Schmidt’s 11th Hour Project. The majority of its grantees are BIPOC-led, grassroots organizations (with an emphasis on those led by women of color) that are advancing climate solutions through organizing and building power in their communities. The organization also invests in capacity-building for its grantees in media training and networks.

Sarah Shanley Hope, Solutions Project’s first executive director, stepped aside in 2020 to introduce the leadership of current CEO and President Gloria Walton (Walton’s also a [guest contributor to IP](#)), who previously led a grantee

organization. Hope is now vice president of brand and partnerships. When discussing the organization’s intermediary role, Hope noted that their model is what Walton and other BIPOC leaders have termed “movement-accountable.” The core idea from Walton, Hope said, is “making sure that we’re generative and not extractive as we fundraise. That is, not competing with our front-line grantee partners, but rather organizing and attracting new, bigger resources into the climate justice movement.”

The organization follows the principles of movement accountability. “Gloria [Walton] was a key leader in educating the Bezos Earth Fund about the role of equity intermediaries and brought in three of our peer intermediaries,” Hope said. “Ultimately, we were able to win and now deploy significant resources that were not present for the movement before, in keeping with those same values: How do we grow the pie? How do we not compete, but rather create space for a larger movement ecosystem?”

Hope noted, however, that as climate and energy funding grows, equity and justice grants still make up a small share of commitments from climate and energy philanthropies. “Even if there are more BIPOC-led, community-rooted organizations receiving dollars, we are looking for the total amount to begin to achieve parity with what is invested in white-led, legacy environmental organizations,” she said. “As Gloria often says, when you take a justice lens, you’re over-investing in those communities that have been disinvested in for decades or centuries, even. So parity is not justice, representative funding is not justice. Justice is going well beyond that to address the historic inequities.”

The growing emphasis on climate equity and justice is also affecting the fundraising priorities of older clean energy and climate organizations. IP spoke with Anne Evens, CEO at [Elevate Energy](#), a clean energy nonprofit primarily serving Illinois, whose largest programs are energy efficiency, solar power and workforce development. Candid data indicates that Elevate was among the 10 largest recipients of private grant dollars in the climate and clean energy sector, receiving just over \$25 million from 2015 to 2019. One of its largest long-time donors is The Energy Foundation. To better support organizations working toward equity, Evens said that providing multi-year funding “could inject sustained energy that will help drive toward climate and racial justice more quickly.”

Evens said that the organization has been committed to equity from its origins through its service to low-income, urban populations, but has expanded that commitment more recently. The organization has diversified its staff—which is now more than half people of color—and shifted its mission and programs to focus on bringing the benefits of the growing clean energy economy to working and BIPOC communities “first and not last.” Evens said, “We can no longer talk about climate justice via clean energy without talking about systemically oppressed populations, unhoused populations, and populations recovering from a climate crisis.”

One trend that may be taking root, at least among the lucky few nonprofits with long-term funder relationships and secure multi-year funding, is giving more critical feedback to foundations. NDN Collective’s Johnson says CEO Nick Tilsen has that kind of relationship with key funders. He says it is part of the organization’s ethos to ask more of their supporters. Johnson noted that Tilsen has formed a

relationship with the Ford Foundation in which he can honestly critique programs like the foundation’s [social bonds](#), which allow Ford to pay out more in grants while still protecting its \$16 billion endowment.

This type of relationship is grounded in the principles of [trust-based philanthropy](#), to which Johnson said the organization adheres. These principles include multi-year unrestricted funding, streamlined applications and reporting, and soliciting and acting on grantee feedback. Mutual and honest exchanges that begin with a grantee are important to build trust.



“We can no longer talk about climate justice via clean energy without talking about systemically oppressed populations, unhoused populations, and populations recovering from a climate crisis.”

—Anne Evens, CEO Elevate Energy

At The Solutions Project, Hope said that following these principles also ensures movement accountability. This includes a governance structure that is majority front-line women of color grantees and annual evaluation by grantees. “Without that oversight and accountability, intermediaries can very easily become gatekeepers and inefficient middle men,” she said. “That’s not contributing value to the funders or the movement. Are we... authentically contributing to their success? Because if we’re not, we’re just a

gatekeeper, not a piece of movement infrastructure, which is an analysis Gloria brought into The Solutions Project.”

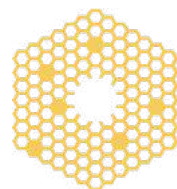
Hope believes intermediary grantmakers can also hold their own funders accountable, and that Walton’s education of the Bezos Earth Fund team affected the grants announced in the second round. Grants to environmental justice veterans are well-represented in the recently announced [\\$203.7 million batch of grants and pledges](#), and three-quarters of the funds will also support the [Justice40 Initiative](#), through which the Biden administration has committed to directing at least 40% of investments in climate and clean energy to disadvantaged communities.

“Bringing forward the history of the climate justice movement was a success of Gloria’s education of the Bezos Earth Fund team,” Hope said. “She attached a long appendix to our proposal about the history of environmental degradation affecting front-line communities and communities of color the most. And that they are often first to the solutions because of their proximity to the problem.” She added that media coverage of the 2020 grants also encouraged the Bezos Earth Fund to invest in organizations centering equity and justice. “The Bezos Earth Fund received significant critiques for their predictable grants to the ‘big greens,’ but the media celebrated their more surprising equity commitments.”

Additionally, Hope suggested thinking of the current state of climate philanthropy within the larger context of the economic transition to a green economy. “The just transition framework is about having an economy that doesn’t concentrate wealth among so few people. And that’s about changing the tax code, salary structures, and minimum wage so

that you are diversifying and redistributing wealth.” Might climate justice organizations take on tax reform and speak truth to power with these donors? That would be a major test of these feelings of trust and commitment to equity.

Intermediary Spotlight



hive fund
FOR CLIMATE AND GENDER JUSTICE

The Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice focuses its grantmaking energies on supporting organizations led by Black women, Indigenous women and women of color. This public foundation also supports those who are on the frontlines of the intersectional concerns of climate, gender and racial justice.

Predominately awarding grants to nonprofits working in the U.S. South, current grantees include Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Atlanta, the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, and the Carrizo Comecrudo Tribe of Texas.

An Analysis of Opportunities & Challenges

The lack of equity in climate and energy grantmaking is, for many of the leaders IP spoke to, both the greatest weakness and most promising opportunity in the field. BIPOC-led groups, who typically represent communities on the front lines of climate impact, have received far less support. Yet important local wins have come despite minimal support, such as grassroots victories for [100% carbon-free energy](#) in New Mexico and [clean trucks](#) in California. New, ethnically diverse movement organizations like Sunrise have helped elevate climate in the national conversation, while Indigenous resistance has been key to raising national awareness of the dangers of new fossil fuel infrastructure, among other impacts.

The largely white leadership of both major green funders and groups is an intertwined weakness and opportunity. Maxton of the Donors of Color Network, which runs the Climate Justice Funders Pledge, likens the case for inclusion to a biodiversity framework. Diversity is essential for a thriving, vibrant ecosystem. “The field of decision makers in philanthropy is such a monoculture. That is also an opportunity,” she said. “You have something that is very anemic compared to what it could be.”

The greatest climate threat facing not just philanthropy but humanity is time. The scientific consensus formalized in the Paris Agreement says we need to roughly halve emissions from recent levels by 2030 in order to avoid catastrophic warming levels and to reach net zero emissions by 2050. This will take an unprecedented transformation of the global economy and

infrastructure. Given this unforgiving timeline, many urge foundations to increase payouts or spend down. “Don’t wait until tomorrow, don’t hire people like me to tell you what to do, get the money out the door,” Thomas said. “We need to be throwing everything we’ve got at this problem. We need it all on the table, like yesterday.”

Climate receives less than 2% of global philanthropy. Many in the field, particularly large institutional funders, cited this as a foremost concern. That share is “woefully insufficient,” said DeBacker of Kresge. “It warrants far more support.” Yet some environmental justice funders and activists push back against the idea that there is not enough money. “There’s a way that we’ve been doing things that have perpetuated this scarcity,” said Walton, pointing to philanthropy’s tendency to switch from fad to fad and privilege those with credentials over those on the front lines, among other concerns.

Several classic philanthropic tendencies are among the field’s weaknesses. Strict reporting requirements, one-year funding cycles, lack of trust, low risk tolerance, micromanagement and the often glacial pace of decision-making can all hamstring grantees and limit effectiveness.

“Philanthropy is not about a contract for services. It’s about providing the resources for the leaders and organizations that you believe in—and giving them the multiyear support to be successful,” Chu said. All these practices are within the control of foundations and thus are equally an opportunity for expanding impact.

Most of all, the practice of giving based on historical budget size has reinforced the dominance of the biggest players. As more money enters the field, it risks exacerbating that divide. “It’s not risky to invest in grassroots organizations, it’s risky not to,” Walton said.

Similarly, the entry of new mega-donors has added a welcome infusion of resources, but it has also raised concerns about influence and transparency. The two largest new donors, Scott and Bezos, have released little information about their grantmaking process.

Initiative Spotlight



CLIMATE
LEADERSHIP
INITIATIVE

Formally launched in 2019, the Climate Leadership Initiative (CLI) “plays a unique role in engaging philanthropists, particularly those new to climate issues, and connecting them with high-impact solutions sourced from the broader climate communities.” CLI’s founding funders include the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, Oak Foundation and Packard Foundation.

While more funders are approaching climate with an intersectional lens, there remain many who fund from within closed issue siloes. These approaches can have unintended effects, or omit key elements. These differing approaches have also caused friction in the field, with some focused on discrete, often tech-based solutions and others trying to build the political will for change.

“There’s a tension between a lot of funders who have identified really particular leverage points for action, like energy efficiency standards... versus seeing the kind of intersectionality,” said DeBacker.

“We need the technical experts... but we also need as a field of philanthropists to be thinking about the base that needs to exist for the right kind of political will and the right people in the positions of decision-making to be able to take ... aggressive action.”

U.S. grantmaking on climate could also have a ripple effect elsewhere in the world, particularly as it succeeds in shaping government policy. “What the U.S. does matters so much,” said Surabi Menon, vice president of global intelligence, ClimateWorks Foundation. “It matters a lot for Europe, too, not just the smaller countries or emerging economies.”

The Biden Administration opens enormous opportunities to advance climate solutions. Philanthropy can leverage substantial funding through targeted investments. Some also see a risk. “If we don’t get equity woven into the policies, we’re going to get bad policy, and we’re going to lose. This is a massive moment of opportunity because we have people within this administration who get it,” Deane-Ryan said. “Will philanthropy be an Achilles heel to what we need to accomplish or not?”

The endowments of foundations focused on climate and energy offer additional opportunities for leverage beyond grantmaking. Despite [notable recent additions](#), relatively few funders have [divested from fossil fuels](#), which contributes to weakening oil companies’ social license. There is

a lot of room for additional [impact investing](#), particularly at a time when clean energy investment opportunities are blooming. Using their financial and moral weight, more foundations could publicly pressure the banks they use to [stop financing fossil fuels](#).

Many climate and energy funders are concerned about the threats posed by misinformation, voter disenfranchisement and other attacks on democracy. False claims spread through social media and elsewhere online are outcompeting facts. Communities of color in the U.S. poll strongly in support of climate action and environmental protection, but new restrictions could limit participation in key states. “Efforts to strengthen and protect democracy are important,” said DeBacker. “We know that elections matter.”

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“The MOST crucial issue funders are not yet addressing as a whole is how environmental and climate philanthropy can drive partisanship OR drive opportunities to bridge the partisan divide. By investing almost exclusively in progressive climate action, however important in its own right, without similarly investing in the civil society groups on the right pushing for climate action, philanthropy contributes to and fuels the partisan divide. This is THE MOST significant strategic opportunity for US climate action that is not yet being mined.”

—Philanthropy supporting organization professional, Lexington, Massachusetts

Resources for Climate Change and Clean Energy Funding

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Websites & Individual Pages with Key Information:

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[Environmental Grantmakers Association](#)

[Health and Environmental Funders Network](#)

[Mobility and Access Collaborative](#). The Funders Network

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Gloria Walton. Will Utley Photography for the Solutions Project. October 19, 2020. Used with permission by Keri Anderson, the Solutions Project.

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¹Based on available grantmaker data from Candid. Excludes federal funding and funding by higher education institutions

²Based on available grant recipient data from Candid. Excludes government organizations.

Feedback?

The State of American Philanthropy is an ongoing project, each SAP brief will be updated periodically to integrate new information, additional data and evolving perspectives. This brief was originally posted to Inside Philanthropy in November 2020. It has not yet been updated. If you have comments or information you'd like to share with us, please email us at managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.org.